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Devil's Swamp Lake fish too polluted to eat, DHH warns

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The Department of Health and Hospitals has stepped up its warnings about swimming and eating seafood from Devil's Swamp and Baton Rouge Bayou in East Baton Rouge Parish. (Emily Lane, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

Kevin Litten, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune By **Kevin Litten, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune**

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Citing "unacceptable levels" of PCBs and mercury, the **Department of Health and Hospitals** has stepped up warnings about dangerous water in Devil's Swamp Lake and Bayou Baton Rouge in Scotlandville.

The department is telling residents not to consume any fish or crawfish pulled out of either body of water, and is also warning people to "avoid swimming and participating in water activities there." Previous warnings had contained advice to limit meals of fish or crawfish from those bodies of water to two per month.

The department said the contamination of fish and crawfish is now worse than previous samples showed from the early 1990s. It cited data collected during 2012 and 2013 that showed levels of the contaminants in some species of fish pulled from the area bounded by Hall Buck Marine Road, Baton Rouge Barge Harbor and the Mississippi River.

"While eating small amounts of fish or crawfish in the past may not result in observable health effects, prolonged exposure from frequent consumption over many years could negatively impact human health," the department said.

Environmental advocates have been critical of previous warnings about seafood consumption from Devil's Swamp Lake in the past. NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune reported in 2005 about concerns that existing warnings were insufficient while poor people were eating fish from the lake on a regular basis.

"The fish consumption advisory currently posted is a woefully inadequate remedy to the problem because the low incomes of persons in this area force them to eat substantial amounts of fish from the lake in order to have enough food," advocates from the Center for Progressive Regulation wrote at the time.

Devil's Swamp Lake is a Superfund site, which means it's being monitored by the federal Department of Environmental Protection as a polluted body of water. The department said the EPA "will continue with the remedial investigation" of the site.

Warnings about Devil's Swamp had been issued as early as the 1980s, according to the EPA.

Anyone with questions about the advisory should contact DHH at 1-888-293-7020.

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